Strangers in a Strange Land: How Non-Traditional International Adult Students See a United States University

Matt Birnbaum
Betty Cardona
Madeline Milian
University of Northern Colorado

Mario Gonzalez
AIMS Community College

Little is known about Central American adult international students' perceptions of their U.S. host institutions. This is problematic because international students' perceptions of an institution's students, faculty, facilities, and the broader social environment may shape their overall learning-abroad experience. This constructivist case study used collaborative inquiry to explore the perceptions that 20 adult international students from Central American countries had of a medium sized public university in the Rocky Mountain west. The participants actively worked to make sense of the institution during their learning-abroad experience process. They perceived that the undergraduate students and the local community possessed a mixture of values, behaviors, and self-expressions that were difficult to reconcile with their own traditions.

One result of the increasingly competitive and lucrative global educational environment is that educators and policy makers are becoming more interested in, and concerned about, the experiences of international students at U.S. institutions of higher education (Boden & Spikes, 2009). In fact, a body of literature has developed that examines traditional college age international students and issues of adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002), satisfaction (Perrucci & Hu, 1995), homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), and mental health (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Unfortunately, the literature gives little attention to understanding the experiences of adult international students, and in particular those from Central American countries. In addition, the research that does exist often problematizes the experiences of international students by drawing comparisons between them and domestic students (Andrade, 2006).

Inherent in this comparison is a reference that frames international students as 'others' (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003) within a dominant or institutional culture and gives primary attention to adjustment issues and classroom based learning. As a result, researchers and practitioners largely ignore the perceptions international students have of their host institutions. This is problematic because international students' perceptions of the host institution's students, faculty, facilities, and the broader social environment may shape their overall learning-abroad experience. Better understanding how international students perceive a U.S. university could help faculty members and administrators provide more effective support and improve satisfaction, learning, and retention (Fox, 1994; Lee, 2010).

This constructivist case study used collaborative inquiry to explore the perceptions 20 adult international students from Central American countries had of MSU (a pseudonym), a medium sized public university in the Rocky Mountain west while studying in an intensive 6-month teacher training program. Our data collection and analysis were informed by theory of the 'Other', in order to help us understand cultural differences and perceptions. This study contributes to the body of literature on adult international students by providing insight into how participants from Central America experienced MSU, and suggests ways to better serve the unique educational and social support needs of students from other developing nations.

International Students in the United States

U.S. institutions of higher education are increasingly recruiting international students in an effort to further internationalize their campuses and academic programs, and to increase revenue (Altbach & Knight, 2010; Lee and Rice, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Current global economic conditions, post-9/11 security policies, and increasing interest in recruiting international students ensures that competition for these individuals will continue to increase (Lee, 2010; Urias & Yeakey, 2009). Although no governmental entity tracks the ages of international students studying in the U.S., many of them are adults. As with all international students, foreign adults studying at U.S. universities possess diverse attitudes, beliefs, life experiences, and personal characteristics situated in the sociocultural, political, and economic foundations of their home-cultures.

An increasingly large body of literature exists examining educational trends, the challenges and adjustment issues international undergraduate students face at U.S. institutions, and the learning experiences of international students (Perucci & Hu, 1995; Zhao et al., 2005). For example, research on adjustment has shown that factors such as level of English language ability, marital status, and country of origin have a significant impact on international student adjustment (Culha, 1974; Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Although there is limited information about how international adult students experience U.S. university campuses, there is benefit in reviewing the existing literature about international students' level of interaction with faculty and peers, what they learn and what they can teach others, and the extent to which they are able to integrate into their host societies (Lee & Rice, 2007; Zhao et al., 2005).

International Education Trends

Institutions of higher education have often reached beyond national boarders for resources and ideas. Notably, the University of Paris hired non-France scholars to teach their students in the 13th century (Lee & Rice, 2007) and U.S. institutions modeled research practices from German institutions in the 19th century. More recently, the internationalization of higher education has been identified with increasing opportunities for generating revenue (Altbach & Knight, 2010). International students typically pay full tuition and contribute an estimated $12 billion to the U.S. economy (Lee & Rice, 2007). In fact, General Agreement on Trade Services (GATS), formally commoditizes education as a component of goods for free trade (Altbach & Knight, 2010).

Because institutions of higher education rely more and more on international students' tuition, these students' perceptions of U.S. institutions of higher education are increasingly important to understand. In addition to often paying full tuition they serve as recruiters when sharing their positive and negative experiences in the U.S. with their colleagues at home. Lee (2010) found three factors contributed to international students recommending a university to future students: being treated fairly and equally; satisfaction with services offered by the institution, and satisfaction with college and living experiences. Further, unbiased treatment from campus community members inside and outside the classroom, feeling accepted and comfortable, and not feeling welcome based on one's ethnicity contributed to satisfaction with educational experiences in the United States (Lee, 2010).

Challenges International Students Face

International students face a variety of challenges when pursuing studies in the United States. Specifically, many experience discrimination and racism (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), language barriers (Perrucci & Hu, 1995), lack of social support (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002), and cultural shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Winkelman, 1994).

Discrimination and Racism. International students experience varying levels of discrimination and racism, often related to American students' perceptions of their home countries (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). The longer international students live in the U.S., the more discrimination they perceive. Additionally, older students experienced more perceived discrimination than younger international students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), a finding relevant to this study. Forms of discrimination and racism include racist comments toward home countries,

inhospitality from American students, having objects thrown at them, negative interactions with faculty and staff on campus, denial of funding or job opportunities, and negative experiences seeking off-campus resources such as housing and shopping (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Lee (2010) compared the experiences of students from developing countries with those from developed countries and found no statistically significant differences in student satisfaction. However, when she regrouped the data based on predominantly white regions (PWR) and predominantly non-white regions (PNWR), statistical significance occurred. Students from PNWR reported less satisfaction and greater adjustment difficulty, indicating students from PNWR did not feel accepted by faculty, staff, and fellow students at their host institution. Students from Europe, Canada, and Australia/New Zealand experienced less discrimination than those from Asia, Africa, and Central America (Lee, 2010; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). These findings challenge educators to consider the discrimination international students face as an extension of racism on U.S. campuses (Lee, 2010).

Language Barriers. Language barriers contribute to challenges international students face (Perrucci & Hu, 1995) by limiting their ability to communicate with people in the host country. Additionally, international students report experiences of discrimination based on their accent, especially when first arriving in the U.S. (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). Students possessing a better English-proficiency experience less stress and more satisfaction than students with lower levels of English-proficiency (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

Social Support. Lack of social support and inhospitality by American students at the host institution also influence international students' experiences in the United States. International students often report struggling to build relationships with American students (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Perrucci & Hu, 1995). Some scholars attribute the inability to build relationships to a language barrier (Huntley, 1993) while others indicate that students at host institutions are unfriendly and not inclusive (Beykont & Daiute, 2002; Dunne, 2009; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Because

international students sometimes had negative experiences attempting to build relationship with host students, they often developed their own support networks on campus with students from their home country or with other international students (Hechanova-Alampay, et. al., 2002; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). In addition, many international students underutilize campus services and support specifically designed for international students (Hechanova-Alampay, et. al., 2002). Students may not access services because they do not know about them or because they have had negative interactions with faculty, staff, and students at the host institution and believe that Americans are not open to working with or understanding the experiences of international students (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Culture Shock. As with most people engaging in new experiences, many international students experience culture shock as they transition to the new environment (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Winkelman, 1994). Causes of culture shock for international students includes stress reactions, cognitive fatigue, role shock, and personal shock (Winkelman, 2004). Stress reactions are physiological reactions to new environments; cognitive fatigue results from "information overload," trying to process more information than typical (Winkleman, 2004, p. 123). Role shock results from the changes in interpersonal relationships and the many roles a person fills in her or his life. Finally personal shock grows from a loss of interpersonal relationships and the intimacy of those familiar relationships in the home setting (Winkelman, 2004). While many services on campus can mitigate some effects of culture shock, most international students will experience varying levels at the beginning of their stay in the U.S. (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Winkelman, 2004). Culture shock can be decreased through social interaction with members of the host community, suggesting the need to provide programs in which international students and host students interact with each other (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

Learning Experiences

Students describe positive classroom experiences as often involving an engaged and connected teacher; negative experiences are associated with disengaged and disconnected

teachers (Pinheiro, 2001). When instructors create a classroom climate in which all students' perspectives are valued, international students felt more comfortable and connected to the material. Conversely, when instructors devalue the relevance of international students' previous experiences to the topics being covered in class, students felt disengaged and disconnected (Pinheiro, 2001). International students were also more comfortable in classrooms when professors maintained control of the class, but used that control to keep the discussion on track. Professors who maintained a distance and taught the class from a "guru-novice" perspective devalued international students' previous experiences, contributing to marginalization in the classroom (Beykont & Daiute, 2002). Further, international students perceive American students as talking more than they listen in class, and as often bringing up personal experiences at inappropriate times and dominating class discussions (Beykont & Daiute, 2002).

Conceptual Framework

This study was epistemologically situated in a constructivist world-view (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010) and informed by a cultural theory of the 'Other' (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Swadener & Mutua, 2008; Vidich & Lyman, 2000). A constructivist view understands knowledge to be constructed through social interaction (Crotty, 2003). Only when humans interact with one-another and their environment are the meanings of objects and social gestures constructed (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Prawat & Floden,1994). Informed by this worldview we sought to understand the participants' 'knowledge claims' or perceptions developed while interacting with our students, the campus environment, and the local community. An important element to this understanding involved carefully acknowledging our roles as researchers who are also situated in their own culture of knowledge, social patterns, and values for objects and social gestures (Bhattacharya, 2009).

The 'Other', is "a messy theoretical and methodological space" (Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 111) but one well suited for helping participants and researchers better understand cultural differences that may exist between and among us. The origins of qualitative-based social research has it roots in

anthropology and the notion of 'civilized' researchers attempting to document and represent the 'dark other' upon return to the center of their colonial empires (Jones & Jenkins, 2007; Swadener & Mutua, 2008; Vidich & Lyman, 2000). While problematic on many levels, this tradition is significant for its failure to fully acknowledge that, to those being studied, it is the researcher who is the 'Other'. The particular characteristics of our participants, who traveled to a "foreign setting to study culture, customs, and habits of another human group" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2), presented an opportunity to partially turn the tables and ask our participants to frame us as "the exotic other" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 p.2).

Methodology

We used a case study research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to link research questions to our data collection and analysis methods. Case study was selected for its openness to multiple theoretical perspectives, encouragement of multiple data types to answer research questions, and suitability for exploring a bounded, particularistic system (Merriam, 1998) in its natural setting when "the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1994, p. 13).

Because this study was conceived and implemented by a team of peers who served as co-researchers interested in engaging social phenomenon, we embedded our methodology in a general collaborative inquiry framework (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). As an emergent methodology, collaborative inquiry has at its foundation the concept that a diverse group of researchers engaged in on-going reflexive learning provides potentially deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). Essential to collaborative inquiry is a willingness among researchers to openly dialogue about multiple interpretations of the data.

Members of the Research Team

Researchers conducting constructivist studies create and analyze knowledge and meanings along side their participants. We therefore provide some basic knowledge about us and our life-experiences so readers may have a more informed basis for understanding our findings. Dr. C came to the United States from Guatemala to pursue her

doctorate in 2004. She researches multicultural counseling, couples and family counseling, international counseling perspectives. Dr. M is a native of Cuba who came to the United States when she was in middle school. She began her professional life as a bilingual and later as special education teacher in Los Angeles. Her research focuses on parental involvement of students with and without disabilities, dual language education, and more recently on international education with a concentration on Mexico and Central America. M.G. is a community college admissions counselor. He was born in Mexico and remembers hearing many of the same stories about the U.S. that our participants mentioned. As a young teenager, M.G. and his family crossed the Rio Grande's in search of work and a better life. While M.G. worked in the fields along side other day laborers, he is now close to earning his Ph.D. Dr. B is the only U.S. born member of the research team and the only non-bilingual member. After college, he worked for three years with incarcerated teenagers, many whose parents where recent migrants to the U.S. Dr. B, who teaches courses on higher education access and public policy, is involved with several campus-based social justice initiatives.

Our Participants

Our participants included 20 international students, ages 27-45, from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. All were primary and secondary school teachers who had been selected to complete six months of intensive teacher training on our campus. The native languages of our participants included Spanish and several indigenous languages. Only one participant was able to communicate well in English. This meant that our participants had a limited ability to interact with most U.S. students, faculty, and administrators. Our participants came from rural communities and had limited knowledge of mainstream U.S. culture, digital technologies, and urban environments. The knowledge that they had was largely acquired through limited exposure to television or stories from immigrant friends or relatives who were either still in the United States or had returned to their country of origin. Most of our participants were themselves parents, many of high school or college-aged teenagers. This meant that they were familiar with the general behaviors

and attitudes of young adults. The final characteristic that made our participants' perceptions unique is that most had never attended college or seen a university campus. While this may seem strange given that our participants are secondary school teachers, it is not uncommon in their home countries for teachers to only have the equivalency to a high school diploma. The result of these combined characteristics is that a U.S. university was a truly foreign social institution.

Study Site and Data Collection

This study was conducted at MSU, a mid-sized regional public institution of higher education located in a small city in the Rocky Mountain west and approximately 60 miles from a large metropolitan city. Many of the undergraduate students at the institution are first-generation, lower income, and from rural areas known for agriculture. The largest area employers include the university and a meat packing company, which attracts employees from many of our participants' home countries.

We collected data for this study using semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Within the first three weeks of arriving on campus, our participants were given a semi-structured interview designed to collect data about the acculturation challenges they anticipated, the coping techniques they planned to use, and their early experiences in the program. We also used these interviews for collecting data about the participant's initial observations about the campus. These interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by a member of the research team who is a native Spanish speaker.

Approximately one month after arriving, we asked participants to start documenting their experiences and the impressions they had of the institution and the research team. Participants were able to document their experiences and impressions using any means with which they were comfortable. To facilitate this documentation, we provided the group with four digital cameras and encouraged them to photograph scenes or events representative of their impressions.

We were able to conduct a second round of semi-structured interviews with ten of the students who volunteered to participate. These interviews

were conducted using photo-elicitation techniques (Collier & Collier, 1986; Pink, 2001) to generate data about the participants' perceptions of the campus, the study body, and the researchers. Approximately half of these interviews were conducted and transcribed by native Spanish speakers. The remaining interviews were conducted using an interpreter because one of the researchers is non-Spanish speaking. Bilingual members of the research team transcribed these interviews. Finally, we conducted a 90-minute focus group with all participants two days before they departed for home. Our hope with the timing of the focus group was that participants' would feel more comfortable sharing any of the negative experiences they had on campus.

Data analysis. We used a constant comparative method to analyze the interview transcripts (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with a particular focus on data related to how our participants experienced our institution. This was a reflexive process that began with conversations among the researchers about what we had each heard (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). From these conversations an initial set of codes emerged that were used to analyze each transcription. We then grouped related texts for rereading and further discussion. It was out of these grouped texts that our themes emerged and were refined. We shared these with several participants, who were able to clarify and confirm their accuracy.

For example, we created 'gender roles' as a code after discussing the transcriptions and agreeing that they should be coded to highlight gender differences. The resulting grouped text suggested that an initial theme in our data involved the different ways stereotypical gender roles were enacted in the U.S. as opposed to our participant's home countries. We shared this theme with participants who affirmed the general nature of the theme and suggested we further analyze it by considering the different resources available to U.S. homes compared to their own. After agreeing on our themes we held discussions about their meanings and possible implications for practice (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000).

Trustworthiness and Reliability

To help ensure trustworthiness and reliability in our data collection and analysis we used multiple investigator and data triangulation techniques (Denzin, 1989; Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2006;). This involved each member of the research team conducting a minimum number of interviews, reviewing all the interview transcripts, negotiating the codes as they were developed, and discussing the emergent themes. In addition, we were able to increase the reliability of our data by using multiple collection methods that included standard interviews, photo-elicitation interviews, and a focus group. These two triangulation techniques helped to control researcher bias and added to the study's overall trustworthiness (Denzin, 1989). Upon reaching a general consensus about our codes and themes we shared these with several participants to help ensure we were accurately interpreting the data and capturing the intended meanings of our participants (Creswell, 2007; Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2006).

Limitations

Like all studies, this one has several limitations that readers should consider. One such limitation is that, apart from the interviews our participants were required to have prior to being admitted into the program, many disclosed that they had never previously been interviewed. While interviews are a common occurrence in many cultures, those conducted for social research purposes are not. It is therefore possible that our participants actually did not understand the concept of interviewing. We attempted to address this by carefully explaining the purpose for our interviews and the focus group, however these are phenomena deeply rooted in Western cultures and traditions.

We also perceived our participants as overly cautious and hesitant to share thoughts that might be less than flattering and ingratiating. While this maybe partially due to our participants' self-perception as temporary guests, another contributing factor may be our participant's home country's histories of repressive governments. This may have made our participants nervous to discuss negative perceptions of campus for fear of reprisal. We attempted to address this by assuring participants that we wanted their true perceptions,

even if these were not flattering to MSU. However, the impact of our perception resulted in us often not 'drilling down' into their responses about their experiences.

Participant's Perceptions of MSU

Our participants had many individual perceptions of MSU and the people in it based on their own life experiences and background. For the purposes of this study we focus on those that appeared most commonly among participants.

Our Students: Responsible and individualistic

Our participants viewed MSU students as representing a strange mixture of values, behaviors, and self-expressions. For example, Victoria, from El Salvador, noted about our students,
Most are responsible and organized. They seem to read and study a lot, and they are disciplined, usually arrive to class on time, respectful of other peoples' property, and are rarely disruptive. They follow rules like walking on the right hand side of walkways. But they are also very independent. Many wear pants below their hips and have strange hair-styles. Unfortunately many are anti-social, un-friendly, self-absorbed, drug users and flat out racists.

Most participants discussed similar perceptions during interviews and focus groups, and seemed genuinely conflicted about their understanding of undergraduates. Because many participants had children of their own, they were familiar with some of the attitudes and behaviors young adults can present. As Marta, a mother of three boys from Guatemala noted, "kids are the same here and over there. Each culture has its own values and I feel like these are determined long before they come to college. Most [MSU] students seem to balance independence and responsibility. But where do they learn to fear strangers? " Our participants' words identify the troubling interactions many had with students and their attempts to understand the foundations of behaviors.

Tattoos: symbols of individualism. Nearly all participants were surprised by the many tattoos and piercings our students have and show in public. During our data collection it became apparent that participants' perceived tattoos as symbolically representing student individualism. During a focus

group, nearly all agreed that this is not something they expected or that would be acceptable in their countries. At issue was not the perception that tattoos were bad, but that they were displayed by college students. Susana, from El Salvador, observed during a focus group "some people in my country have tattoos, but not many of them attend college." Susana also implied that in her experience, tattoos in Central American cultures had political or cultural meanings. Nearly all the other participants agreed and hypothesized one reason college students have many fewer tattoos in Central America is that it can be difficult to cover them. Pointing at some long sleeves Susana suggested that "here, you can cover [them up] in business environment, but that is more difficult where I come from." Susana's close friend, Lourdes, also from El Salvador, suggested that this is one example of how environmental differences might explain some of the differences between our various cultures.

When we pressed participants to suggest explanations for why our students' had so many tattoos, it was suggested that tattoos and body piercings were symbols of independence and the freedoms MSU students are afforded, and the openness of our culture to individual expression. Although participants were largely unable to understand the particular meanings of MSU students' tattoos, they perceived them serving apolitical purposes and merely a reflection of whimsical adolescent behaviors.

Because participants found it difficult to believe that MSU students were asking their parents for permission before getting their tattoos, their presence suggested a type of parenting style that did not foster a proper respect. "Where I am from," one participant observed, "we expect our children to ask for permission a lot more than parents here. Perhaps parents here give students too much individual freedom and independence." During a focus group Lourdes mentioned that the parents of MSU students should perhaps be less supportive of the type of individualism leading to so many tattoos. All our participants laughed and nodded in agreement.

Lourdes' comment, and the reaction it created, highlights a tension between several additional perceptions our participants had about student freedoms, parenting, and residence halls. Although U.S. style residence halls, and all the freedoms they

afford, do not exist in most Central American countries, for the most part participants actually liked the idea of them as a transitional space leading towards independence for young adults. Participants however would prefer their own sons and daughters live at home when attending college. One stated, "your student's parents obviously care deeply for them but they do not seem to want to know what their sons and daughters are doing outside the classroom. This would not happen at home." In our participants' perceptions, independence (or the symbolic representation of an individual's independence) is an important value but not at the cost of established familial respect.

In addition to tattoos and piercings, participants also observed many of our students smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and using marijuana. These too were characterized as probably representing powerful symbols of individual freedom and maturity, especially for 18 year-olds. However, these were not as problematic as tattoos. Gloria, from El Salvador, but seemingly speaking for the entire group, observed that these behaviors were common among traditionally aged college students back home and did not seem to have long term effects. "They are temporary and young adults know there are consequences for engaging in these behaviors at the wrong time," she said.

Wanting to belong and abide by social rules. In contrast to individual behaviors that symbolized freedoms, participants were surprised by the close identification MSU students had with the institution. Lourdes observed that nearly every car in the parking lot had a university sticker on its back window, that a high percentage of students wore clothing with the university's logo, and that thousands of students showed up to a homecoming bonfire. "They identify with the school, they feel close to it" she said, "and that would never happen back home." When we asked Lourdes to explain why this is the case, she stated, "until recently only 1% of people in my country went to college, and even now that more go, the only reason more go now is for the increase in financial status. Students are not proud of their university in the same way. Students come to MSU for more reasons than that. In addition to education, they get to mature as part of a community." As illustrated by this quote, participants understood students do not attend MSU simply to get a better job but to also grow and develop as individuals.

Our Unwelcoming and Unfriendly Students

For all of MSU's students' freedoms and conformities, participants were surprised by their lack of interest in interacting with others. Speaking for the majority of participants, Roberto from Guatemala said, "they just seem uninterested in us. Most don't seem to want us here. They simply don't interact." The result of this was an unexpected sense of isolation and alienation by participants. While they initially attributed this to their own culture shock, homesickness, and language barriers, as the semester progressed they increasingly believed this was instead related to our students' general fear of foreigners, and particularly of adults. Roberto, like most participants, arrived on our campus believing he would make many friends and our students would be interested in getting to know him. Sadly, "they do not seem to be happy with outsiders." The general impression was that most MSU students did not even acknowledge participants' presence. Manolo, from El Salvador, stated that, "in our cultures, we have the custom of saying 'hi' or asking 'how are you'. We did not see this here." Lorenzo, from Nicaragua, noticed that this was most obvious when he was on the elevator. "Some would not even get on the elevator if they saw it was us," he went on, and most participants agreed. Roberto added, "yes, there was a language barrier, but even the students I know spoke Spanish didn't want interaction, it was strange."

The residence hall elevators were the location of numerous events perceived as forms of passive and active racist behavior. Nearly all participants experienced situations involving MSU students not getting on the residence hall's elevator with them. Several participants also described incidents involving students making racists comments as the elevator doors closed behind them, rudely referring to them as 'Mexicans' or suggesting they should go home.

It was apparent to us that participants were troubled by these incidents but were even more concerned by how uncomfortable these incidents were for us to hear. When we asked why no one had mentioned these types of incidents until near the end of the program, one participant subtly changed the topic by stating that while she had also experienced such behavior, she also experienced

many acts of kindness and understanding. Again, nearly all participants agreed they too had such experiences but had difficulty remembering examples. Susana, as if wanting to provide a rational explanation to some of the experiences that have been shared, noted the following:

"I think you have all kinds of people everywhere. Even in our country. I   think we come to this country in a different role. There are some people   who do want to get to know us. When we had our cultural presentations some students would say, "Where are you from? How beautiful! Referring   to our traditional attire.""

MSU Professors and the Campus

Our participants made fewer observations about MSU professors, perhaps because they did not want to risk offending us. However, they did notice that many professors were late to class and wore clothing that would be considered too casual in their counties. Initially they worried this was a sign of disinterest and unpreparedness. However, "They are so well prepared that it shows how much they care," observed Maritza from Honduras. She further explained, " these types of behaviors convey to students that what is important at MSU **is** education and learning, not the social formalities needed to demonstrate proper respect." "Perhaps," another participant observed, "professors are trying to let students know that they should focus on learning." This perception was further developed among participants because, as Lourdes stated, MSU faculty "often seem to be asking us what we think. This doesn't happen at home…instead professors there are more concerned with appearances and the memorization of factual data."

Participants observed that our campus' buildings are robust and in constant use. For many, they were the largest buildings which they had ever been inside, which was exciting. They also noted that classrooms did not belong to any particular professor, who instead had offices that they personalized "to create their own private home to work in." Participants commented on the openness of the MSU campus, both in terms of physical space and security. As Maritza observed, "everyone is free to come and go as they please, there are no restrictions. And yet somehow it remains clean and safe." Susana added, "in my country, the buildings on this campus would not last more than a week

before they were vandalized. Every major structure must be protected by guards or it gets marked." While MSU's campus is rather modest in comparison to many other state universities, participants experienced it as a beautiful oasis.

Participants noted that MSU's buildings' separate us all from nature and created artificial spaces without natural noise, color, or temperature. "Here," Maritza explained, "there are walls, wall, walls. We never knew what was happening outside and this was a distraction to us. Why are there no windows in the building, in the classrooms? At home we need to have at least an open window so we know what is going on. Otherwise we would never be comfortable." While participants believed such sterile environments could create better learning environments for MSU students, they agreed that it would be disruptive for classrooms back home.

Many of the photographs that participants took and commented on during the photo-elicitation interviews were of the classrooms and buildings. When looking at the photographs they had taken inside the classrooms, some participants commented that they looked forward to getting outside once class was over, even if it was raining or snowing. "How can they [MSU students] be comfortable not knowing what it is like outside for 3-4 hours" Susana asked? She added "it seems strange that they don't care." A series of images taken by 4 participants of a single tree standing in a large parking lot illustrates the participants' desire to stay connected to the natural elements. Each had taken weekly pictures of the tree and showed them to the group whenever the weather changed significantly. Participants also mentioned enjoying being able to walk on the large, well-maintained grass fields and through the green spaces between the buildings.

The Broader Community

Study participants spent considerable time in the local community either for personal reasons or as part of the community work requirement of the program. Their perceptions of the community focused primarily on various cultural issues that may initially not seem to be related to higher education. However, as we discussed these perceptions, it became apparent that each has implications and relevance to our campus.

A culture of stuff and garage sales. Perhaps not surprisingly, most participants were overwhelmed by the large amount of material possessions the students and staff have. Coming from relatively poor countries, this was expected. What we did not expect was how some of the participants would embrace their newly found access to material possessions. Of particular interest to all participants were the weekend garage sales held in the local community. Such events presented a number of unfamiliar, but easily grasped, concepts. Garage sales are a phenomena with which most individuals situated in the dominant U.S. culture are rather comfortable: at some point a person collects too much 'stuff' in their home, or has 'stuff' they no longer want, and therefore puts it up for sale. These were foreign ideas to our participants, who observed that they would simply give possessions they no longer wanted to family members. For a large number of participants, Saturday morning garage sales turned into a regular, usually inexpensive social outing that provided an unobtrusive view of the unwanted contents of U.S. homes.

While most participants where satisfied with the experience of wandering around garage sales, others saw them as an opportunity to purchase items to bring back home. These individuals, mostly males, would spend nearly the entire weekend canvassing garage sales and purchasing large numbers of items, which they would bring back to the residence hall. Gloria tried to explain the reason for these participants' seeming obsession. These participants had an image of triumphantly returning home with bags full of stuff, a "sign of a successful experience in the U.S." "You must understand," Gloria said, "that some of these men were working at age 7 or 8, to contribute to the family income. They think that returning with all this stuff, while sad, will demonstrate to their families how successful they are. It is machismo." Lourdes foreshadowed another theme and helped to explain Gloria's words when she mentioned that, "so many men [from our country] come to the U.S. and return with nothing. People think it was all for nothing and they weren't successful, couldn't make it."

Technology. Our participants' traveled from relatively rural communities in their countries, and yet most were familiar with the World Wide Web, cellular phones, and digital cameras. In fact, about half the participants brought cell phones or digital cameras with them. We initially thought that most of the participants would need significant assistance using the computers in our labs, but this turned out to be unnecessary. When we gave out 4 digital cameras to participants interested in visually documenting their experiences, one asked some general questions about its operation while the others quickly open the bottom to check the size of the memory card we supplied.

However, the divide between the technological 'haves' and 'have-nots' would become apparent in other ways. For example, it was observed that for the first few weeks of the program one of the female participants would walk up to her room on the 8th floor of the residence hall, even when she had grocery bags or laundry. When asked why she walked so many flights, she somewhat embarrassingly told us that she had never been taught how to use the elevator.
On a similar note, it turned out that most participants were not aware of how to adjust a room's central heating. As the weather turned colder during the semester they slept in increasingly heavy cloths until someone explained how to use the thermostat.

Too much technology? Study participants observed that both students and faculty used a lot of hand held digital devices. However, what they found most interesting was the pervasiveness of technology throughout the office spaces and classrooms. "Is it a good thing and does it help learning," one asked during a focus group? After visiting several public schools, Lourdes observed, "many schools have purchased computer programs that allow for comprehensive reading skill development on the computer while the student thinks he or she is just playing on the computer, this is absolutely ingenious. But it can seem like everyone is focused on the technology in the classroom, office, or on their desk and they forget about the people." She went on, "think of how much money it costs, that could go to so many things. The classroom technology may not actually be necessary for learning. You use Smartboards to teach your first-graders to read. We don't have such things, but we still teach our students to read!" Others observed the use of technology was a focal point of the daily lives and routines of MSU students and staff, who walked around with their noses buried in their phones, IPads, or netbooks.

Participants did not find this objectionable and actually reasoned that such technology was often used to keep people connected to their families.

Gender

Central American cultures have a long tradition of well-defined gender roles. Female participants had a very positive view for how gender roles were enacted in the U.S. and most hoped to bring particular attributes home with them. In addition to observing U.S. men performing domestic tasks, they also saw their male peers washing, ironing, and cooking for themselves for the first time. "Oh yes, when I get home I am going to talk to my husband about how things are different here," mentioned Victoria with a great deal of enthusiasm.

The female participants seemed to have learned how the life of women could be different when government policies are implemented as written. Ileana, from El Salvador, expressed the following sentiment that other female participants agreed with regardless of the country of origin:

There is less Machismo here, more equality and opportunities. There is a lot of discrimination in El Salvador. Here women have rights, because the Government makes it possible. Over there people ask the government, but the government does not follow through.

Female participants also expressed admiration for their male colleagues because of the new role they had adopted, although not always comfortably. Male participants in the programs shopped, cooked, clean their apartments, did their laundry, and even invited some of their female colleagues to have dinner with them. As with all other participants, male participants created organizational structures for apartment chores that included sharing financial resources to cover expenses, planning meals, cooking, shopping, and laundry. At the cultural dinners planned by the group, male participants shared responsibilities for both cultural presentations and meal preparation. As Marta mentioned, "Some of our male colleagues experienced for the first time how it felt to cook and wash laundry. Now, they say they will help cook and wash at home."

Without exceptions, all participants were impressed and surprised with the many luxuries that were available to them at the residence hall that facilitated house-keeping chores. Most notably

were electricity, washing machines, and hot water. In comparison to the daily challenges they constantly encounter back home, they sometimes referred to their time at our institution as a "vacation," although they recognized the academic pressures they were experiencing. Victoria and Marta's statements are illustrative of this point, "I have to wash dishes and clothing by hand, I don't have washing machines. No hot water. Here I am on vacation, no husband or kids." "Here we had the luxury of using dishwashers and washing machines, unfortunately we will have to get used to the old way again."

The contrast of living in rural areas in Central American or the Dominican Republic, and then experiencing life in a small town in the United States without family members, was both challenging and transformative for these adult students. One area that provided opportunities for substantial growth was that of gender roles. Both female and male participants were forced to examine their own views and understandings of the role women and men play in different societies, and were able to experience how their individual roles could be different in a new social context that is supported by improved women's rights and technology advances.

Discussion and Implications

From our participants' perspectives, MSU, its students and faculty, and the authors of this study were the 'others'-- foreign entities with behaviors, values, and resources they worked to make sense of. Our findings suggest participants actively engaged in this sense making process and plan to share stories of their experiences and the behaviors and customs they observed. Although many of the stories will be complimentary, some aspects of MSU will be described in in less than flattering terms.

While participants admired the educational and developmental nature of residence halls, most will describe their feelings of isolation they experienced living in one. These feelings were similar in many ways to the 'culture shock' experienced by international students in other studies (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). However, our participants' experiences with culture shock seemed less related to "information overload" (Winkelman,1994, p. 123), which leads to cognitive fatigue and feelings

of being overwhelmed, and more with a profound sense of loss of existing social relationships and the inability to develop new ones within the residence halls. To the degree that the phrase 'culture shock' implies a sudden and intense experience, the minimal development of new relationships is significant because it related to chronic cognitive fatigue.

Similarly, participants will likely fascinate their friends and families with descriptions of the physical size of MSU's residence halls and their elevators but will identify these as locations of overt racism and oppression. Participants understood our idealized concept of residence halls, but after experiencing discrimination in them first-hand, would be unlikely to want their sons or daughters to live in one. Our participant's experiences were similar to those documented in the literature (Lee & Rice, 2007), especially for adult international students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) and individuals from predominately non-white countries (Lee, 2010). Preparing adult international students during pre-departure orientations for the racism and discrimination they will likely experience while in the U.S. could help reduce the confusion and discomfort they will feel when it occurs, especially if education is provided about the various campus resources available to help address such behaviors.

The experiences of adult international students, as documented here and in previous studies, should raise troubling ethical and pragmatic questions for faculty and higher education administrators. If we believe that all students should learn in welcoming communities, then faculty and administrators have an obligation to ensure that both the in-class and out-of-class environments for international students are non-hostile. That international adults are recruited as a means to generate revenue and further internationalize U.S. campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2010; Lee and Rice, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) in exchange for access to U.S. higher education does not ameliorate a responsibly to them as students. Pragmatically, these same students will serve as ambassador for individual institutions upon their return home. If access to a multitude of U.S. institutions of higher education represents a true marketplace, institutions that provide a truly welcoming community will have a competitive advantage.

It seems likely that participants will also struggle to explain our 'culture of stuff', which has lured many of their family members and fellow citizens to the United States. From their privileged vantage point of living on a college campus, our participants observed the many possessions owned by the average MSU student and local community members, and were able to compare this to the living conditions of those who worked in the local meat packing factories. Not only did they observe our community's social and economic inequities, most watched as some of their peers became obsessed with purchasing as much stuff from garage sales as they could fit into their rooms. Our participant's had no problem understanding the desire to have many possessions, but selling belongings instead of giving them to family and friends seemed strange.

Our participants desired interaction with MSU students in a wide variety of settings, expected that they would be accepted by the university community, and believed everyone would learn a great deal from each other. Unfortunately, our participant's felt like the campus viewed them as strangers and, too often, as unwelcome guests. This relationship is documented elsewhere in the literature (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Perrucci & Hu, 1995). Although they understood that young adults often behave immaturely in their interactions with strangers, it was clear that our participants would never have accepted such behaviors from their own children. This highlights one of the cultural tensions that may exist for international adult students from Central American nations studying in the United States. Specifically these parents would expect a certain level of maturity from their sons or daughters before they leave home, while many parents in the U.S. seemingly expect their sons and daughters will mature in college. From our participants' perspectives, it is largely the parents who are responsible for the behaviors of the 18-24 year old college students.

Similar to previous studies, our participants were largely unaware of the many available campus support services (Hechanova-Alampay, et. al., 2002). Although specific services had been mentioned when they arrived, many participants were not aware they existed, or did not believe they were available to them. We believe this can be

attributed to a combination of factors. For example, because our participants had limited knowledge of college campuses, it is likely their awareness of college was focused largely on academics. Also, due to cultural beliefs, participants may have had a stigmatized view of support services as primarily for individuals with 'real' problems. Because many participants were unfamiliar with interviewing, it was difficult to collect more data about this issue. The more questions we asked participants about MSU support services, the more adamant they became about not needing them.

In addition to not fully understanding the nature or purpose of the interviews we conducted for this study, it was apparent that participants were concerned about possibly offending us or institutional leaders. Even after explaining the purpose of our study, assuring them anonymity, and stating that no information we collected would be publically available until long after they had returned home, it was evident that participants felt it necessary to discuss MSU and its students only in a positive light. In addition to possibly biasing the data we collected about MSU and its students, it left us wondering if there were other issues our participants had not discussed. Scholars working with all international students should consider these limitations.

This study highlights one of the complexities of conducting cross-cultural studies. Many participants were suspicious of the interviewing process, a foreign concept to most, and our interest in wanting to know more about their experiences at MSU. Our efforts to explain our interests comforted some participants but made others even more suspicious. In a somewhat ironic twist, it seems possible that the more effort we made to learn about our participant's experiences, the less information we were able to collect.

Practical Advice

Our interactions with participants through the implementation of the program, as well as the results of this study, lead us to recommendations for higher education personnel when designing programs for international students, particularly for students who come from developing countries. These recommendations include activities for pre-arrival orientation, arrival orientation, and on-going needed support.

Pre-arrival orientation: International students, particularly those who have never been to the United States, will benefit by receiving general information about the institution, community, and state; as well as more specific information related to program faculty members, campus life, and climate in the region. Such information may help adult international students prepare for the social and psychological stresses of culture shock. For example, a pre-arrival package with picture of the campus, the community, and the state will help students visualize the architectural style of the campus and the community.

In addition to these practical pieces of information, it might be beneficial for programs to provide information about the undergraduate student cultures at the institution. Having some prior awareness of the individualism MSU students display may have provided participants a better sense for why they sometimes appear antisocial and self-absorbed. Similarly, providing information about the possible negative social interactions they might encounter, and the campus resources available to help address it, could help individuals prepare themselves for such encounters. It could also be beneficial to provide a basic orientation for students, and R.A.s in particular, who will live near international students so they also have time to prepare for living among individuals from other countries.

Arrival orientation: Upon arrival, assistance such as using technology on campus, purchasing calling cards or information on other ways to maintain communication with family members back home, and information on banking system are basic necessities for these students. Also important is to discuss legal regulations on campus and the community that may be unknown to participants, as well as information on climate changes that may affect their health. For example, the high altitude of the Rocky Mountain area and the dryness of our climate required us to explain to our participants about the typical health symptoms that are associated with high altitude sickness and the need to drink water often while the body gets used to the altitude. Equally important is to provide information about the process of cultural adaptation to prepare them for the natural typical stages individual go through while living in a new culture. We also found it necessary to conduct a tour of grocery stores in our area where participants could

purchase ingredients that were familiar to them. To follow up the grocery store tour, we provided two workshops on nutrition and simple meal preparation to provide our participants with quick but nutritious recipes that they could prepare during their stay here. These nutrition and meal preparation workshops were particularly helpful to our male participants who were not used to cooking their meals.

On-going support: The balance between providing specialized programs for adult international students and integrating them into the campus community is indeed a difficult one. While cultural presentations and dinners can inform our undergraduate and graduate students about cultural practices in other countries, more meaningful interactions and friendships among the two groups of students require more targeted efforts in order to be successful. When students begin to discover differences between themselves and our U.S. university students, as well as other campus and community practices, it is important to provide clarification on cultural practices and norms. Through informal and formal interactions, students should have access to program personnel who can clarify and expand their views on U.S. cultural and educational practices. These explanations and clarifications have the potential to facilitate cultural understanding and possibly even friendships with our local students and community members. Additionally, attention should be given to difficulties students may experience due to either cultural adaptation or problems back home. Access to counseling may be necessary if the stress prevents students from achieving the goals of the educational program. In general, often contact with students will provide a vehicle for assessing their needs for counseling or other psychological support.

Finally, this study provides an example of how collaborative inquiry can be applied successfully to our work with international students. Our interdisciplinary and multicultural research team faced numerous logistical, communicative, and data-interpretation challenges that could have prevented the study from being conducted. However, the active participation and differing cultural perspectives' members of the research team brought to the study were central to its success. Indeed, it is only through this type of interdisciplinary and multicultural collaboration

that we can effectively understand the educational, social, and cultural priorities of international students who attend our institutions of higher education.

MATTHEW BIRNBAUM is Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership at the University of Northern Colorado.

Contact information:
Matt Birnbaum
McKee Hall 414
Campus Box 103
Greeley, Colorado 80639
Birnbaum7261@gmail.com
719-633-6757

BETTY CARDONA is Assistant Professor of Counselor Education & Supervision at the University of Northern Colorado.

MADELINE MILIAN is Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Northern Colorado.

MARIO GONZALEZ is Admissions Advisor at AIMS Community College.

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